

# A Cowboy's Trail

There is, in America, no more pliable figure than the cowboy. He is whatever we want him to be whenever we need to imagine him. He rides in from somewhere else, driving cattle, chasing badmen, fleeing the past or simply mulling over the landscape as it looks from the back of a horse. He is as artificial as the worst of movies can make him, and he is more authentic than even the truest of stories that are told about him. How richly we have elaborated the myth of cowboys — surrendering the reality nearly completely in the process — can be demonstrated by a simple thought-experiment. Try to imagine a western that could star both John Wayne and Roy Rogers, who died yesterday at 86. It can't be done.

One reason is that Roy Rogers was that almost unimaginable thing, the domesticated cowboy. He had a steady girl and a steady horse and a steady sidekick and, in a sense, a steady job that had nothing to do with cattle but everything to do with being a sort of Stetson Superman, always appearing on the scene of trouble in the nick of time wearing a costume that made Superman look dowdy. (To

recent generations, he is known, sadly, only from the restaurants that bear his name.) Into the scripts that cast John Wayne, trouble would ride unexpectedly from somewhere out beyond the horizon. But in Roy Rogers's movies, and still more in his TV series, which ran from 1951 to 1957, there was no horizon, only the edge of the set. To the character Roy Rogers played when he was playing himself on screen, trouble came in distinctly limited forms, resolved by a song or a chaste embrace with Dale Evans, his wife and partner of more than 50 years.

But to those of us who grew up watching Roy Rogers on television in the 1950's, it was not the romance that registered. It was his friendship with Trigger, his horse. Every half hour peaked when Roy leaped aboard Trigger — did we ever see Roy actually saddle his horse? — and galloped down a shade-mottled trail to the sound of hoofbeats. For many viewers the picture of Roy Rogers, aglint in the sun, racing across the harmless West upon Trigger, is a picture as invincible to time as a childhood memory.

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